

executed entries that seasoned dermatologists will find the volume well worth having in their personal libraries.

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Financial Disclosures: None reported.

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THE SOUL OF MEDICINE: TALES FROM THE BEDSIDE

By Sherwin B. Nuland
214 pp, \$26.95
New York, NY, Kaplan Publishing, 2009
ISBN-13: 978-1-6071-4055-9

ALL PHYSICIANS ARE COLLECTORS OF STORIES. SOMETIMES A physician shares these stories with others. More often, these tales of unforgettable patients are stored silently in the physician's already crammed memory. Years, even decades, later, these impressive patient encounters possess the power to provoke a laugh, a tear, a chill, or a sigh. *The Soul of Medicine: Tales from the Bedside* acknowledges the value and durability of the stories that physicians accumulate in the daily practice of medicine.

Constructed along the lines of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the book has an old-fashioned feel. Most of the 21 stories comprising *The Soul of Medicine* are narrated by physicians at the end of their medical careers. The brief tales frequently focus on the patient-physician relationship and that between the physician mentor and the student. Readers of *JAMA* will find the format of these first-person narratives familiar. The confessional tone and content are similar to the essays regularly appearing in the section A Piece of My Mind. A variety of specialists—surgeons, a pediatrician, an ophthalmologist, a family physician, a geriatrician, an obstetrician, a dermatologist, and an internist—contribute tales of memorable patients. The afflictions of these patients include common ailments (congestive heart failure and diabetes), unusual illnesses (feculent empyema), and devastating diseases (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis).

The stories zoom in on the attitudes and behavior of medical professionals. Physicians and patients are portrayed as flawed human beings who are equally hopeful of satisfactory outcomes and better days. Recurrent themes revolve around expectations, choices, and mistakes. These physicians have common sentiments: the practice of medicine is difficult and often painful. All patients can teach a physician something. Machines and technology are important, but the history and physical examination retain high value. A physician's most useful skills remain the simplest ones—looking and listening. The contributors offer precious advice too: Always review old medical records. Remember that human nature is unchanging. Accept the fact that physicians must live with uncertainty. Witty dictums, such as “training and luck trump brains every time,” conjure thoughts of Confucius.

All of the anecdotes are heartfelt. A few are nail-biters. One physician's reminiscence, “The Neurosurgeon's Tale(s),” is exemplary. Snuggled in the middle of the book, its moral is well-known to all physicians: they sometimes win big, but they occasionally lose big, too. The tale illustrates this point by juxtaposing 2 emotionally charged incidents. One has a happy ending, while the other concludes horribly. The neurosurgeon shares an account of triumph and parental love in the treatment of a girl with congenital hydrocephalus. In stark contrast, he also discloses his inability to save an abused 2½-year-old child who dies from bleeding of the brain. He does not hesitate to reveal his helplessness, wrath, and grief. Other stories bring attention to physicians who are arrogant or guilty of poor judgment; one is an outright scoundrel. One of the tales features a general surgeon with bipolar disorder. During a family vacation, he decides to discontinue his medication. When he returns to work, it is obvious that he is a changed, manic man. The results are a cholecystectomy gone dreadfully wrong, a malpractice lawsuit, and an anesthesiologist's lingering guilt.

For physician-writers, 2009 is off to a terrific start. Two works of medical fiction are must-reads: *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese and *Beat the Reaper* by Josh Bazell. Verghese's novel is empathic, hopeful, selfless, and spiritual. Bazell's thriller is brutal and vulgar but at the same time hilarious and unflinching. *The Soul of Medicine* by Sherwin Nuland stands as a noteworthy work of nonfiction. I will not lie. I do not truly know what the soul is. But I am certain that in this trio of books—an odd literary trinity to be sure—the essence of being a physician is clearly spelled out.

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Financial Disclosures: Dr Miksanek reported writing an essay (“On Caring for Difficult Patients”) included in a book published by Kaplan Publishing. He has not and will not receive any monetary compensation or royalties for that essay.